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THE ORIGINS OF RELIGION IN THE CHILD

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Abstract

Religion is here regarded as an externalized adaptation which serves both the individual and society. It is argued that the four major elements of institutional religion—the God concept, Scripture, worship, and theology—provide ready-made solutions to adaptive problems engendered by four cognitive need capacities—the search for conservation, representation, relation, and comprehension—which emerge in the course of mental growth. It is concluded that while religious elements such as the God concept may have arisen, in part at least, out of confrontations between cognitive need capacities and physical or social reality, the religious elements are nonetheless sui generis and are not reducible to the needs and the phenomena that produced them any more than these needs or phenomena are religious in themselves.

Every social institution, whether it be science, art, or religion, can be regarded as an externalized adaptation which serves both the individual and society. From the point of view of the group, social institutions provide the ground rules and regulations which make society and social progress possible. Looked at from the standpoint of the individual, social institutions afford ready-made solutions to the inevitable conflicts with social and physical reality which the individual encounters in his march through life. Social institutions, therefore, originate and evolve out of the adaptive efforts of both society and the individual. It follows that any complete account of the origins of religion must deal both with individual and social processes of adaptation.

In the present paper, I propose to treat the origins of religion solely from the perspective of the individual and not from that of society. It is not my intent, therefore, to give a comprehensive account of the origins of religion in general nor in any way to negate the central importance of social factors in the origination and historical evolution of religion.

All that I hope to demonstrate is that religion has an individual as well as a social lineage and that this individual lineage can be traced to certain cognitive need capacities which emerge in the course of mental growth. To whatever extent religion derives from society's efforts to resolve the conflicts engendered by these individual need capacities, we are justified in speaking of the origins of religion in the child.

Briefly stated, the paper will describe four cognitive need capacities with respect to the age at which they first make their appearance, the problems of adaptation which they engender, and the corresponding resolutions offered by religion. A concluding section will take up the question of the uniqueness of religious adaptations from the point of view of the individual.

EMERGENCE OF COGNITIVE NEED CAPACITIES IN THE CHILD

In describing the mental development of the child, this presentation will lean rather heavily upon the work of the

Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget. For more than forty years Piaget has been studying the mental development of the child. He has evolved a general theory of intelligence, wherein he derives the thinking of adults from the gradual elaboration of mental abilities in the child.¹ In effect, Piaget argues that each new mental capacity carries with it the need to realize itself through action and that, in the course of such realization, the individual comes into conflict with social and physical realities. The resolution of each such conflict results in structural changes which we call growth and which in turn pave the way for new conflicts and further growth in an unending dialectic.

Although Piaget's theory would seem to have rather direct implications for religious development, he has not himself, except for a few early papers (Piaget, 1923; 1930) dealt with the problem at length. It seems to me, however, that the major elements common to most religions provide comfortable solutions to some of the conflicts which Piaget's cognitive need capacities engender in the course of their realization. I must emphasize, however, that this is my way of viewing the problem and is not necessarily the way in which Piaget would deal with the issue, were he to attack it.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the cognitive need capacities themselves, it might be well to give a few concrete illustrations of the way in which their efforts at realization result in problems of adaptation. Once the child acquires language and a rudimentary understanding of causality, for example, he enters the notorious "why" stage. He soon discovers, however, that parents do not appreciate such questions, particularly when they are endlessly repeated. The child's

attempts to realize his capacity for causal understanding thus bring him into conflict with the adult world. In the same way, when the child of four or five years begins to realize his emerging capacity to deal with quantitative relations, he again comes into conflict with others. His constant concern with "who has more" fails to endear him either to his parents or to his siblings. In short, every cognitive capacity is in itself a need which prompts behaviors that can create discord between the child and his social and physical milieu.

INFANCY AND THE SEARCH FOR CONSERVATION

During the first two years of life, the human infant makes truly remarkable progress. From an uncoordinated, primarily reflex organism, he is within the course of a short two-year period transformed into an upright, talking, semi-socialized being, more advanced intellectually than the most mature animal of any species. Of the many accomplishments during this period, none is perhaps as significant nor of such general importance as the discovery that objects exist when they are no longer present to the senses, that is to say, the discovery that objects are *conserved*.

To the adult, for whom the world and the self are clearly demarcated, it is hard to envision the infant's situation. The closest we can come to it is in a state of reverie or semi-consciousness when the boundaries of awareness waver and we are imbedded in the very pictures we are sensing. This is the perpetual state of the infant for whom all awareness can hardly be more than a series of blurred pictures following one another in an unpredictable sequence. Only gradually does the

child begin to separate his own actions from things and to discriminate among different things, such as the human face. Even when the response to the human face occurs, usually in the second and third months of life, there is still no awareness that the face exists when it is no longer present. An infant, for example, who is smiling delightedly at an adult peering at him from the side of the crib will turn his head away immediately if the adult ducks out of sight. The infant does not cry; he behaves as if the adult drops out of existence when he disappears (Piaget, 1952).

Only toward the end of the second year and as a consequence of a series of progressive learnings and coordinations does the infant give evidence that for him objects now exist and have a permanence of their own quite independent of his immediate sensory experience. At this age, for example, the young child will search for objects, such as candy or a toy, which he saw hidden from view. This awareness of the permanence or conservation of objects comes about when the progressive coordinations of behavior give rise to internal representations or images of absent objects. It is the two-year-old's capacity to mentally represent absent objects which results in their conservation.

The construction of permanent objects is important because it is a prerequisite for all later mental activity. All of our concepts start from or involve objects in one way or another, so the recognition of their permanence is a necessary starting point for intellectual growth in general. Object permanence, however, is just the first of many such permanences or conservations which the child must construct. As his mental capacities expand, he encounters new situations which par-

allel, though at a higher level of abstraction, the disappearance of objects. Illusions are a case in point. A spoon in water looks bent or even broken, the moon appears to follow us when we walk, just as the sun appears to revolve around the earth. Similar problems present themselves on the social plane. The child must learn to distinguish, for example, a true invitation to stay at a friend's home from an invitation which is, in fact, a polite dismissal. In all of these cases the child has to distinguish between appearance and reality, between how things look and how they really are. Infancy thus bears witness to a new mental ability, the capacity to deal with absent objects, and to a corresponding need, *the search for conservation*, a life-long quest for permanence amidst a world of change.

One of the problems of conservation which all children eventually encounter, and to which they must all adapt, is the discovery that they and their loved ones must ultimately die. In contrast to the conservation of the object, which is first transient and only later permanent, the child begins by assuming that life is everlasting and is shocked when he finds out that it is transient. After the initial recognition, often accompanied by intense emotional outbursts, the child seeks means whereby life can be conserved, a quest which continues throughout his existence.

In many cases, the conflict between the search for conservation and the inevitability of death does not arise with its full impact until adolescence. Religion, to which the young person has already been exposed, offers a ready solution. This solution lies in the concept of God or Spirit which appears to be religion's universal answer to the problem of the conservation of life. God is the ultimate

conservation since he transcends the bounds of space, time, and corporality. By accepting God, the young person participates in his immortality and hence resolves the problem of the conservation of life. Obviously, whether in any particular case the young person will accept the religious solution will be determined by a host of personal and sociocultural factors. All that I wish to emphasize here is that religion offers an immediate solution to the seemingly universal human problem posed by the search for conservation of life and the reality of death.

EARLY CHILDHOOD AND THE SEARCH FOR REPRESENTATION

As was true for the period of infancy, the preschool period is one of rapid mental growth and of wide-ranging intellectual accomplishments. Foremost among these is the mastery of language. With the conquest of language the child goes far beyond the representation of things by mental images. Language is a series of conventional signs which bear no physical resemblance to that which they represent. The child must now painstakingly learn to represent all of those objects which were so laboriously constructed during the first years of life. The child is not, however, limited to representing things by language, he can now also employ symbols which bear some semblance to the objects which they represent. At this stage, the child creates his own playthings and transforms pieces of wood into boats, pieces of paper into airplanes, and odd-shaped stones into animals (Piaget, 1951). It is at this stage too, that the child dons adult clothes and plays house, store, and school. All of these behaviors, the mastery of language, and engagement in symbolic play activities bear witness to a new cognitive ca-

capacity, the ability to use signs and symbols, and to a new cognitive need, *the search for representation*.

The search for representation, which makes its appearance in early childhood, like the search for conservation, continues throughout life. At each point in his development, the young person seeks to represent both the contents of his own thought and those of his physical and social environment. As his knowledge of himself and his world grows more exact, he seeks more exacting forms of representation. Not only does his vocabulary increase at an extraordinary rate, but he also begins to acquire new tools of representation, such as mathematics and the graphic arts. Yet, the more exacting the child becomes in his search for representation, the more dissatisfied he becomes with the results. One reason, to illustrate, why children usually give up drawing in about the fourth or fifth grade is their disgust with the discrepancy between what they wish to portray and what they have actually drawn. In the same way as the child matures, he gradually realizes that language is a lumbering means at best for conveying his thoughts and is hopelessly inadequate for expressing his feelings.

For the young person who has accepted God, the search for representation poses special problems. If religion provided only a concept of God and nothing else, he would be at a loss to represent the transcendent. How, after all, does one signify that which is neither spatial, temporal, nor corporeal? Religion, however, affords more than a simple God concept; it also provides representations of the transcendent. In primitive religions the representations were totems or idols; whereas in modern "revealed" religions, the transcendent

finds its representation in Scripture. Here again, however, as in the case of the concept of God, the individual's acceptance of the religious solution is multi-determined and difficult to predict in the particular case. What must be stressed is that once the individual accepts the concept of God, the question of his representation is an inevitable outcome of the search for representation in general.

CHILDHOOD AND THE SEARCH FOR RELATIONS

The school age period is one of less rapid intellectual growth than was true for the preceding two periods. During this epoch in the child's life he is, for the first time, exposed to formal instruction and must acquire a prescribed body of knowledge and special skills such as reading and writing. The acquisition of a prescribed body of knowledge, however, presupposes a mental system which is in part at least comparable to the mental systems of adults who transmit the knowledge. Such a system does come into being at around the sixth or seventh year, the traditional "age of reason." Research on children's thinking has shown that this is in fact quite an appropriate designation of the accomplishments of this age period. It is only at about the age of six or seven, for example, that the child manifests the ability to make logical deductions (i.e., to recognize that if A is greater than B, and if B is greater than C, then A must be greater than C even if he has not compared A and C directly); to nest classes (i.e., recognize that, say, boys + girls = children, and children - boys = girls, etc.) and to seriate relations (group elements systematically so that $A > B > C > D < E < F$, etc.) (Piaget, 1952; Elkind, 1961; 1965).

One general feature of this new ability to reason in a logical manner is that the child now tries to relate phenomena in the world about him in a systematic manner. The youngster at this stage wants to know how things work, how they are put together, where they come from, and out of what they are made. Moreover, his concepts of time and space have broadened, and he can now grasp historical time and conceive of such distant places as foreign countries. It is the age period during which Robinson Crusoe has his greatest appeal, because Crusoe describes in marvelous detail all the building, planting, hunting, and fishing activities in which he engages. In a very real sense, then, the child is trying to relate things to one another with respect to time, space, causality, and origin. It seems appropriate, therefore, to speak of the new ability that surfaces at school age as *the capacity for practical reason* and of the corresponding need as *the search for relations*.

The search for relations, which makes its appearance in childhood proper, continues throughout life. As the young person matures, he seeks to relate himself to his social and physical milieu and to relate the things and events in his world to one another. While this search for relations is often gratifying, it is also on occasion disheartening. There are many events in life which cannot be related to one another in any simple rational way. The quirks of fate and accident are of this kind and defy man's rational efforts. There is often no simple rational answer to the question, "Why did this happen to me?" So, while the quest for relations helps man to understand himself and his world better, it also makes him aware of how much he cannot know and understand.

Within the religious sphere, the young person who has accepted the concept of God and His scriptural representation, is confronted with the problem of putting himself in relation to the Transcendent. Here again, in the absence of a ready-made solution, the young person might flounder and his resolution of the problem would be makeshift at best. Religion, however, affords a means whereby the individual can relate himself to the deity, for it offers the sacrament of worship. By participating in worship, the young person can relate himself to the Transcendent in a direct and personal way. To be sure, the young person's acceptance of religion's answer to the problem will again be determined by a variety of factors. Indeed, some of our research (Elkind & Elkind, 1962; Long, Elkind and Spilka, 1967), suggests that many young people reject the formal worship service but nonetheless engage in individual worship in the privacy of their rooms. In any case, for the adolescent who has accepted God and his Scriptural representation the question of relating himself to God is an inevitable one, no matter how it is resolved.

ADOLESCENCE AND THE SEARCH FOR COMPREHENSION

The physical and physiological transformations so prominent in adolescence frequently obscure the equally momentous changes undergone by intelligence during the same period. As a consequence of both maturation and experience, a new mental system emerges in adolescence which enables the young person to accomplish feats of thought that far surpass the elementary reasonings of the child. One feat that makes its

appearance is the capacity to introspect, to take one's thought and feelings as if they were external objects and to examine and reason about them. Still another feat is the capacity to construct ideal or contrary-to-fact situations, to conceive of utopian societies, ideal mates, and pre-eminent careers. Finally, in problem solving situations the adolescent, in contrast to the child, can take all of the possible factors into account and test their possibilities in a systematic fashion (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958).

Implicit in all of these new mental accomplishments is the capacity to construct and think in terms of overriding theories which enable the young person not only to grasp relations but also to grasp the underlying reasons for them. To use a biological analogy, the child is concerned with "phenotypes," whereas the adolescent focuses his attention upon the "genotypes," the underlying laws and principles which relate a variety of apparently diverse phenomena. It seems reasonable, therefore, to characterize the mental ability which emerges in adolescence as the capacity for theory construction and the corresponding need as *the search for comprehension. . . .*

As in the case of the other need capacities we have considered, the search for comprehension persists throughout life, although it takes different forms at different stages in the life cycle. The search for comprehension is also like the other need capacities in the sense that it never meets with complete success. Whether it be in the field of science, art, history, or government, each new effort at comprehension uncovers new puzzles for the understanding. The same holds true on the personal plane. Although the adolescent, to illustrate, now has a conception of personality which enables him

to understand people in depth, he still encounters human foibles and eccentricities which defy his generalizations. And, though his new-found capacity for comprehension enables him to hold a mirror to his mind, he still frequently fails to understand himself.

In the domain of religion, the problem of comprehension arises naturally to those who have accepted God, his Scriptural representation, and the sacrament of worship. Many young people often seek such comprehension on their own with the result that they become bewildered and disheartened by the failure of their efforts. Religion again provides a solution. Every religion contains a body of myth, legend, and history which provides a means for comprehending God in His various aspects.

In modern religions, the resolution to the problem of comprehension is provided by theology. It may be, however, that the ferment within present-day theological discussions makes it more difficult than heretofore for the young person to accept the religious solution to the problem of comprehension. Be that as it may, for the individual who has accepted God, his representation, and his worship, the problem of comprehension must be faced regardless of how it may be resolved.

CONCLUSION

I am aware that the foregoing discussion probably raises many more questions than it has answered. All that I have tried to do is to present a scheme to illustrate the extraordinary fit between certain basic cognitive need capacities and the major elements of institutional religion. It is probable that this fit is not accidental and that religion has, in part at least, evolved to provide solutions to

the problems of adaptation posed by these need capacities. To the extent that this is true, then to that extent are we justified in speaking of the origins of religion in the child.

Psychologists who have concerned themselves with religious phenomena (e.g., Allport, 1960; Dunlap, 1946; James, 1902) are in general agreement with respect to one point, namely, that there are no uniquely religious psychic elements. Insofar as anyone has been able to determine, there are no drives, sentiments, emotions, or mental categories which are inherently religious. Psychic elements, it is agreed, become religious only insofar as they become associated with one or another aspect of institutional religion. Nothing which has been said so far contradicts this position, with which I am in complete agreement.

Nonetheless, the view that there are no uniquely religious psychic elements does not preclude the possibility that there may be uniquely religious *adaptations*. Adaptations, by definition, are neither innate nor acquired but are instead the products of subject (individual or society) environment interaction. Every adaptation is thus a construction which bears the stamp of both nature and nurture, yet is reducible to neither one. The same holds true for religious adaptations. The concept of God, Spirit, or more generally, the Transcendent, cannot be reduced to the search for conservation any more than it can be traced to the phenomenon of death. Contrariwise, neither the search for conservation nor the phenomenon of death is in itself religious, although it may well take part in the production of religious elements. Like a Gestalt, such as a painting or a melody, the Transcendent is greater than the sum or product of its parts.

As suggested above, once the concept of God or Spirit is accepted as the ultimate conservation, it necessarily entails genuinely religious problems for the other emerging need capacities. These problems can, in turn, be immediately resolved by the ready-made constructions afforded by institutional religion, such as Scripture, worship, and theology. From the standpoint of the individual, there-

fore, the concept of God or of the Transcendent lies at the very core of personal religion. At the same time, however, whether the concept of God is a personal construction or one acquired from institutional religion, it is always superordinate, transcending the particular individual or social needs as well as the phenomenal facts out of which it arose.

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